

“Anthropologists in the Making”

BUILDING
BRIDGES OF
CROSS-CULTURAL
UNDERSTANDING

BY MEERA
PATANKAR

SINCE 1998 CHILDREN ages eight through twelve have flocked each summer to participate in the Museum’s popular summer camp. For eight weeks from June to August, wide-eyed and curious children explore cultures from across the globe as part of the “Anthropologists in the Making” summer program.

Each day the children arrive at the Museum and have special access to the galleries before they open to the public. They learn to decode Egyptian hieroglyphs, identify symbols in Buddhist paintings, search for naturalistic motifs in Southwestern folk art, and they participate in many other interpretive activities under the guidance of undergraduate and graduate students in anthropology, archaeology, and education.

They spend the remainder of the morning engaged in such creative projects as designing Tibetan sand *mandalas* based upon personal symbols of significance, bartering grains and spices in a “trade market,” or participating in a mock archaeological dig using real excavation techniques.



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Each week the children also experience cultural performances such as demonstrations by Andean folk musicians, Chinese martial artists, and “Roman legionnaires.”

Through their participation in the summer program, children learn to embrace and celebrate aspects of culture unique and different from their own. They also learn to identify common threads that connect human societies to one another. At a time when cross-cultural understanding is an essential seed to plant in young people, this summer program encourages children to build foundations for tolerance by drawing on their natural inquisitiveness about the diverse experiences of humans from antiquity to the present day. 🏠

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I still vividly recall the last session of August 2001, entitled “Art and Culture of the Islamic World: Mosques, Minarets and Mosaics.” Just days before September 11th the children enthusiastically explored Islamic art forms by crafting Bedouin veils out of brightly colored cloth, yarn, and ornamental coins, and making beautiful hand-painted tiles with Arabesque patterns. They also explored the Museum’s Islamic collection, learning about the significance of ornate Arabic calligraphy and other aspects of Islamic culture seen in its arts. With anti-Islamic sentiments resonating across the nation a few weeks later, I was grateful that we had been able to explore Islamic culture, and I felt certain that those children were more informed about people and regions of the world that were now increasingly in the news.

